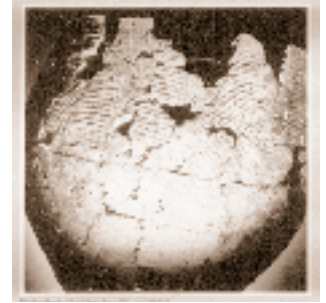


The Language of Images Producing a Poster for Your Archeology Awareness Week



The production of an annual archeology awareness week poster has potential benefits far beyond simply advertising the event. At its best, an annual poster becomes a tangible icon for the event, a piece that is easily recognized, anticipated, shared, and contributes to your education effort. At its worst, it does little more than squander time, money, and divide the people charged with its production.

As a designer, my experience has been that the fundamental problem of producing a poster is not primarily one of design. Nor is an effective poster necessarily the result of a handsome budget, use of an accomplished design firm, or a high-end printing house. The success of the project is based, first and foremost, on those involved in reaching a shared view of what it is you are trying to communicate.

Graphic design is not simply the act of “making pretty.” Like the words in this sentence, graphic design is an act of communication. The designer uses scale, color, graphic images, and

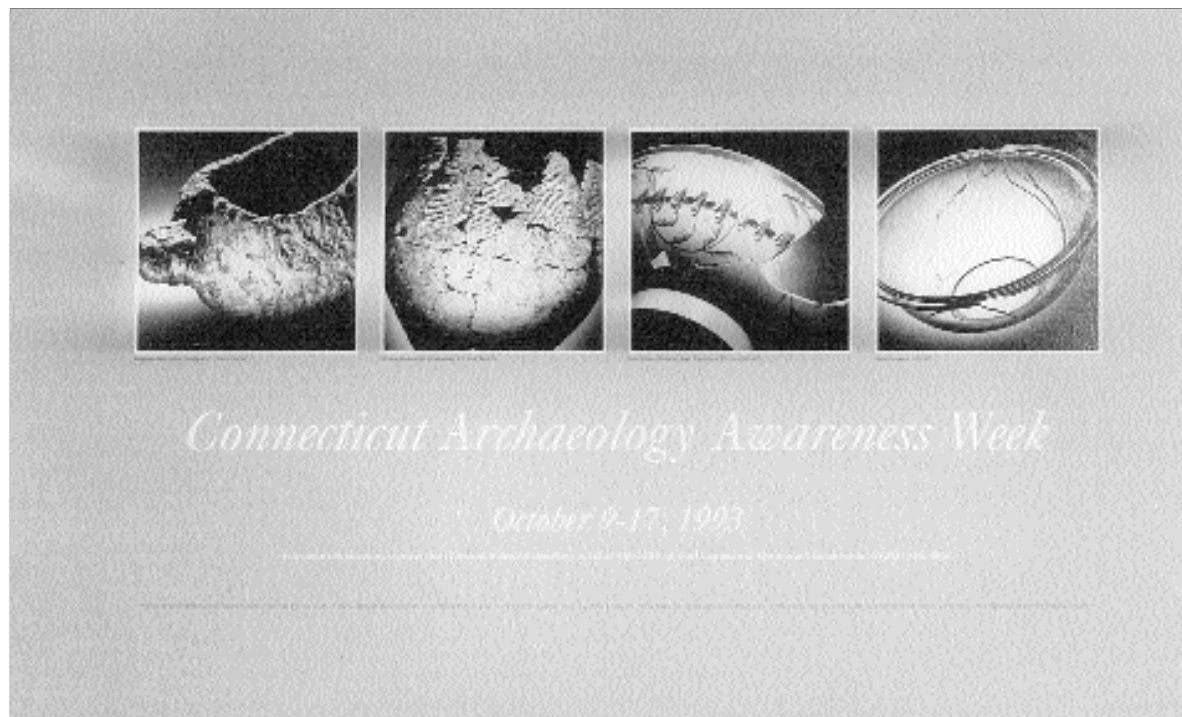
typography in conjunction with one another to transfer facts, evoke emotion, build anticipation. He is in essence an interpreter, taking the goals presented to him by the planning group and interpreting them in the language of graphic design. If the goals are muted, then so too will be the poster.

At first glance the goal for an archeology awareness week poster seems obvious: let people know about the event. It is a good place to start. Set six archeologists around a table and they will readily agree on it, but then things quickly become complicated. After only a little discussion the perception about what the event should be, will be as varied as the personalities at the table. Who is this event meant to reach? Are we appealing to professional archeologists, amateurs, educators, lay people, children? What is it you want to get them thinking about? What are their preconceptions about archeology? What are the most unique aspects of archeology in your state? Are there particular events that should be focused on?

Consider the designer's role as interpreter—literally. Draft a statement of intent for the event

that everyone agrees on, and share it with him/her. If you have samples of graphic work you respond to, even if they are not related to archeology, share those. They might help the designer identify a tone or feel you think is effective. At this stage in the game do not concern yourself too much with cost. You are

*Connecticut's 1993
Archaeology
Awareness Week
poster. (The poster
received honorable
mention in the
1994 American
Association of
Museums
Publications Design
Competition.)*



Working with Graphic Arts Professionals

To the uninitiated, working with designers, artist, photographers and printers can feel like travel in a foreign land. Each speaks a language that seems alien and obtuse. Rule number one is to **trust your instincts**. Ask to see samples of work comparable to the one you will be producing. On the creative side of the process (the realm of designers, artists, and photographers), you will simply respond to certain works more than others. Try to define and articulate what it is you are responding to. Craftsmanship is evident in a printer's work, even to the layman. Look for accurate alignment among the different colors being printed, even saturations of color where there are broad surfaces of ink, clarity in the reproduction of photographs, and natural looking colors in color photographs. These will be clear indications of how much pride the printer takes in his/her work.

The most important consideration in working with graphics professionals, however, is finding someone you feel comfortable working with. No matter how creative a person is, no matter what a company's record is for getting a project in on time and within budget, now matter what praise others have showered on them, if you cannot effectively communicate with the person you are dealing with, if you do not feel like they are open to your input, if you don't get to a point where it is clear that everyone involved in the project shares the same vision of what it is you're trying to create, the project will show it.

working with the designer to develop a conceptual model for the poster, an idea, and any designer worth his/her salt will be able to adapt an idea to a variety of budgets.

Keep your conceptual model simple. If everything goes well you will end up with a poster that holds people's attention for about 10 seconds. In that time your aim is to break them from the distractions of the everyday world, draw them in, pique their curiosity, make them want to know more, tell them when and where to find out more and hope that you have made an impression that is strong enough to last until the event begins. Everything in the poster should be there for a reason—if it does not serve your message, it distracts from it.

If this is an annual event, consider how a body of posters will function over the years. In Connecticut we settled on a conceptual model that presents similar artifacts over time. Through a series of four photographs a visual time line is created that strives to connect the past with the present. By repeating the concept, but choosing a new series of artifacts, we are able to significantly vary the visual feel of the poster each year, while still making it easily recognizable as an icon of our event. This promotes a fresh feel to the event,

while at the same time allowing us to create a very diverse image of what archeology is in Connecticut. By creating some continuity in your poster you will save yourself some work (Why reinvent the wheel?), and potentially make it more effective.

Once you begin to develop a vision of what your poster might look like, you must enter into that region of inevitable compromises. The project itself is essentially one large equation, that must balance in the end. You may be hiring designers, artists, photographers, printers, a mailing service; each offering a measure of quality and convenience to the project. Buried within the equation are further choices on the number of posters to be printed, its size, whether it will be one color, two colors or four colors, the quality of the paper it will be printed on, whether it will be mailed in tubes (more expensive), or folded into envelopes (less expensive). Within a finite budget, it will be these compromises that most determine the final look of the poster.

The equation is not solely balanced against finances. Time will be spent organizing and attending meetings, raising funds, searching out and working with graphics professionals, tracking down artifacts and/or locating sites to be photographed, compiling mailing lists, stuffing mailing tubes. It is hard to stress enough the price such a project can extract in time. If the project is managed by committee, make sure it is clearly understood who is responsible for each task. A simple misunderstanding can quickly become a major stumbling block.

If every state produced an archeology awareness week poster, the equation would be different for each. It is hard to offer any tangible advice to help you grapple with these compromises, other than chance to anticipate some of the choices you will have to make. Again, the best tool you have to gauge the compromises will be a clear vision of what it is you are trying to create.

A poster project can seem to take on a life of its own. What starts as an adjunct to an event, becomes an event in itself. This may appear like more of a burden than it is worth, but it can also be a blessing in disguise. If carried out with clarity and determination your archeology awareness week poster can become something that is anticipated and even searched out, and what more effective advertisement can you have for your event than that?

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